

Issues in Review

ELIZABETH SCHAFER (*Contributing Editor*), ALISON FINDLAY, RAMONA WRAY, YASMIN ARSHAD, HELEN HACKETT, EMMA WHIPDAY, REBECCA McCUTCHEON

Early Modern Women Theatre Makers

Introduction: Attending to Early Modern Women as Theatre Makers

ELIZABETH SCHAFER

Early Theatre 17.2 (2014), 125–132

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12745/et.18.2.2600>

This essay introduces the playwrights under consideration and looks forward to the four essays in this section examining the work of early modern women theatre makers. The introduction ends with a census of early modern women's plays in modern performance.

This Issues in Review focuses on the performance of early modern plays created by women theatre makers, that is, women who wrote, translated, published, commissioned and, in all probability, produced and performed in plays. But these plays have been corseted and closeted by critics — some of them feminist — who have claimed access to the theatre makers' intentions and have asserted, despite no documentary evidence, that these plays were not intended to be performed. In particular these plays have been half strangled by critics' use of the anachronistic and inappropriate nineteenth-century term 'closet drama'. The methodology used here to uncorset and uncorset three of these plays — Lady Jane Lumley's *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*, and the Mary Sidney Herbert commissioned *Cleopatra* by Samuel Daniel — is to explore them by means of the

Elizabeth Schafer (E.Schafer@rhul.ac.uk) is professor of drama and theatre studies at Royal Holloway, University of London.

collective, creative, and community-based acts of criticism that take place when the plays are performed today.

Producing any play requires energy, resources, and commitment. Little can be proved empirically, in terms of observable, measureable, and repeatable results. The participant group, however, the theatre practitioners and their audience, do explore the play's dramaturgy together, and some nuggets that emerge from these explorations deserve preservation, analysis, and discussion. For example, during 2013, the 400th anniversary of the first publication of *The Tragedy of Mariam*, director Rebecca McCutcheon mounted a series of performances, workshops, and installations engaging with the play. Performance studies scholar Gay McAuley attended one of the early workshops and, in discussion afterwards, McAuley made a connection between Cary's dramaturgy and that of the Phaedra plays. Given that Cary's biography states that she read and translated Seneca, his *Phaedra* certainly seems a plausible source for *Mariam*:¹ both plays open with the all-powerful king Theseus / Herod presumed dead and the women characters speaking out as they have never done before; the king returns from 'death' and kills someone he loves because of a trumped-up charge of illicit sexual activity; the play ends with the king lamenting the death of the loved one. In the provisional, improvisational, and exploratory atmosphere of McCutcheon's workshop, McAuley made a potentially very fruitful connection. So this Issues in Review is interested in rehearsal and workshop as well as performance, and it encompasses the witnessing and testimony of performance studies alongside more traditional scholarly approaches.²

Alison Findlay's discussion of Lady Jane Lumley's *Iphigenia in Aulis* certainly demonstrates the advantages of combining traditional scholarship and performance studies approaches. Findlay's historicism combines with the experience of being a performer in *Iphigenia* and witnessing audience response, and she proposes the image of the palimpsest with its multiple layerings, as a critical and evocative tool. The essay testifies to *Iphigenia*'s potential for emotional impact whether speaking to Lumley's family of the death of her cousin, Lady Jane Grey or, as in 2014, speaking to the acts of remembrance performed to mark the centenary of the outbreak of World War I and the sacrifice of so many young lives.

Ramona Wray then analyses two productions of Elizabeth Cary's *Tragedy of Mariam* that took place in 2013. As an editor of the play, Wray is particularly well placed to offer a nuanced and sensitive response to these performances: a site-specific production in St John's Church, in Cary's hometown of

Burford, and a physical theatre production by Lazarus Theatre Company in London. Wray finds that *Mariam* has much to offer contemporary theatre and argues ‘for a regime change in theatre history’ which, like Cary studies, has marginalized *Mariam* as performance, and largely bypassed the impact of casting, costume, lighting, set, and movement on the play.

Helen Hackett, Yasmin Arshad, and Emma Whipday then combine forces to explore a work commissioned, possibly produced, by Mary Sidney Herbert, Daniel’s *Cleopatra*. Combining art history, literary history, women’s history, and the experience of rehearsal and performance, they explore the play’s connections with Anne Clifford. Cleopatra’s defiance in the play, whether read, recited, or performed by Clifford, may well have helped her think about, plan, rehearse, and indeed script, the defiance Clifford herself was to enact after the death of her father in 1605 when she began her heroic quest to claim her inheritance, despite opposition from King James.

Finally, theatre director Rebecca McCutcheon reflects on her 2013 series of site-specific performances of Cary’s *Tragedy of Mariam*. McCutcheon uses a frankly performance studies approach to consider how changes in performance context, and the hauntings and hostings that different sites offer, can create new meanings for, and insights into, *The Tragedy of Mariam*. McCutcheon’s primary interest is in placing the play in non-theatrical spaces — reimagining it and reconfiguring it as, for example, a gallery installation — and her reflections are full of revelations of benefit to Cary scholars. McCutcheon’s very diverse *Mariams* offer a series of valuable, creative, theatrically astute, but also critical encounters with ‘Elizabeth Cary’ and her play.

Although this Issues in Review chooses to concern itself with three particular plays, directors and actors have recently explored by means of performance the work of other early modern women theatre makers. The Globe’s Read Not Dead company, for example, staged Mary Wroth’s *Love’s Victory* in 2014 in the Baron’s Hall at Penshurst. Also in 2014 an exciting production of Margaret Cavendish’s *The Unnatural Tragedy* took place at the London fringe venue, the Oval House, Kennington. The director, Graham Watts, dramaturged the play and many of Watts’s artistic decisions were driven by pragmatics, such as the decision to use modern dress to save money, or cutting ‘to give each student a decent amount of stage time and not exceed the theatre hire time’.³ But after the performance Watts noted:

The evening performance was electric ... the place was buzzing and people were literally lining up afterwards to shake my hand and talk about such a fantastic play. The audience ... had no idea what to expect and were blown away by the style and content of Cavendish's play. Safe to say that we know beyond all doubt that she is a playwright who can engage modern audiences.⁴

Certainly, as a member of the dress rehearsal audience, watching the sheer diversity of female experience, and the variety of life trajectories that Cavendish juxtaposes in her play, I found the experience exhilarating.

Performing women theatre makers' plays also continues to be a political act. First, consider the aspect of equal opportunities: while those who discount its theatricality lock *The Tragedy of Mariam* into the 'closet', by contrast critics hail George Büchner's 1837 play *Woyzeck*, written for a theatre that simply didn't exist in Büchner's lifetime, as revolutionary, not closet drama. But if the work of a revolutionary male playwright deserves loving dramaturgy — and directors have to work hard and inventively to fill in the gaps between the words of Büchner's elliptical, unstable text — then plays of revolutionary female playwrights deserve equally loving dramaturgical remixing and repackaging; they cannot be expected to spring from the page Athene-like ready for battle/staging, speaking unproblematically to audiences across the centuries. After all, directors of Shakespeare — or Jonson, Marlowe, Middleton, Webster — routinely dramaturg or adapt the plays they are directing, remarketing them for audiences today.

Many of the performances considered here, and those listed below in the appendix, are also political because they are not mainstream. Student and amateur performances as well as staged readings are usually disregarded in conventional performance histories but, by operating on the margins of theatre practice, these productions can ignore commercial pressures and, like the women theatre makers themselves, take more risks, be less conventional. So salvaging insights from these performances, workshops, and rehearsals taking place in theatrical nooks and crannies, away from the mainstream and commercial theatrical marketplaces, is important. In addition, the theatrical nooks and crannies evoke the domestic, non-professional, familial collaborative spaces in which these plays were first conceived. And for the women theatre makers discussed here, the choice of drama as a genre was also political. Creating a play involves ventriloquism, imaginative roleplay, and thoughts of acting differently from normal, whether or not the play is realized by means of a full performance.

The main thing is to continue to explore, anatomize, have fun with, and gain new insights into these texts in the living, breathing laboratory that is contemporary theatre practice. But, in the end, for me, no amount of theorizing can account for the exhilaration of witnessing Nicola Sangster, as Mariam, step out onto the reconstructed Globe stage, playing to an eclectic mix of conference goers and startled tourists, and demand ‘How oft have I with public voice run on?’ I, for one, hope that contemporary theatre production will continue to give ‘public voice’ to the dramatic characters created by these remarkable early modern women theatre makers.

Notes

- 1 See ‘The Lady Falkland, Her Life’, by one of her daughters, in *The Tragedy of Mariam, Fair Queen of Jewry*, ed. Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson (Berkeley, 1994), 186.
- 2 The classic case for a performance studies approach to early modern plays in performance is made in the preface to Carol Chillington Rutter’s *Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare’s Stage* (London, 2001). For more on *The Tragedy of Mariam* and a rehearsal studies approach see Elizabeth Schafer, ‘Unsilencing Elizabeth Cary: World-Making in *The Tragedy of Mariam, Fair Queen of Jewry*’, in Tom Clark, Emily Finlayson, and Philippa Kelly (eds), *Worldmaking: Literature, Language, Culture* (Amsterdam, forthcoming) FILLM Studies in Literatures and Languages.
- 3 Emails from Graham Watts, 3 January 2015 and 6 December 2014
- 4 Email from Graham Watts, 3 January 2015.

Appendix: Modern Performances of Plays by Early Modern Women

Cary, Elizabeth

The Tragedy of Mariam, Fair Queen of Jewry (ca 1605)

1990 Scenes from *Mariam* compiled by Catherine Schuler and Sharon Ammen, ‘Attending to Women in Early Modern England’ conference, University of Maryland

1990 Play reading produced by Lois Potter at the Folger Shakespeare Library as part of a seminar ‘Drama in Context: 1613 as a Test Case’

(Later play reading also produced by Potter at the University of Delaware)

1994 19–22 October. Directed by Stephanie Wright for Tinderbox Theatre Company at the Bradford Alhambra Studio

1995 2–3 November. Directed and dramaturged by Elizabeth Schafer, Studio Theatre, Royal Holloway, University of London <http://rhul.mediacore.tv/media/mariam>

1996 Directed by Paul Stephen Lim. Staged reading for the English Alternative Theatre at the University of Kansas

2002 March. Play reading at the Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham

2007 22 July. Directed by Rebecca McCutcheon. Rehearsed reading at the King's Head, London

2012 28 June. Directed by John East for Just Enough Theatre Company at the Central School of Speech and Drama

2013 14 March. Directed by Kirstin Bone. Staged reading by Improbable Fictions, Tuscaloosa, Alabama

2013 12 June. Directed and dramaturged by Rebecca McCutcheon, site-specific performance in St John's Church, Burford as part of the Burford Festival

2013 13–14 August. Pop up *Mariam*. Directed and dramaturged by Rebecca McCutcheon, The Bussey Building, Peckham Rye, London

2013 12–17 August. Adapted and directed by Gavin Harrington-Odedra, Tristan Bates Theatre, Covent Garden, London

2013 7 December. Directed by Rebecca McCutcheon. Performance at Shakespeare's Globe as part of the 'Women and Shakespeare' conference

Cavendish, Jane and Elizabeth Brackley

The Concealed Fancies (1645)

1994 14 December. Directed by Alison Findlay and Jane Milling, University College, Bretton Hall, December. Filmed. Extract (Luceny's song) at <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/video/english/performance>

A Pastoral (1645)

2000 Extract, directed by Alison Findlay, Hoghton Tower. Filmed by David Blacow and Michael Bowen, Lancaster University Television

Cavendish, Margaret

1999 Margaret Cavendish Performance Project — Gweno Williams:

'General Prologue' (published 1662); Prologue to *Love's Adventures* (published 1662); Scenes from *Lady Contemplation* (published 1662); Scenes from *Youth's Glory and Death's Banquet* (published 1662); Selections from *The Convent of Pleasure* (published 1668); Epilogue from *Youth's Glory and Death's Banquet* (published 1662)
2004 DVD *Margaret Cavendish: Plays in Performance*

The Convent of Pleasure (1668)

1995 4 March. Scenes from the play directed by Bill Pinner, University College of Ripon and York St John

2003 June. Directed by Gweno Williams. Filmed

2005 7–10 July. Directed by Gweno Williams, assisted by Peter Cockett. Convocation Hall, McMaster University, Sixth International Biennial Margaret Cavendish Society Conference

Bell in Campo (published 1662)

2007 1 July. Directed by Ian Gledhill for the Sheffield University Drama Society at the Riding House, Bolsover Castle. Filmed

The Unnatural Tragedy

2014 10 December. Directed and dramaturged by Graham Watts, Oval House, Kennington, London. Performed by the British American Drama Academy

Herbert, Mary Sidney

The Tragedie of Antonie (1592)

1999 Directed by Marion Wynne-Davies. Staged reading at Hoghton Tower. Extracts: <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/performance-ceremony-ritual/women-and-dramatic-production/>

Herbert, Mary Sidney (as commissioner/deviser)

The Tragedy of Cleopatra (1594, revised 1607) by Samuel Daniel

2013 3 March. Directed by Emma Whipday, the Great Hall of Goodenough College on Sunday. Produced by Yasmin Arshad, with Helen Hackett as executive director.

Filmed

2014 23 June. Knole House. As above. <https://thetragedieofcleopatra.wordpress.com/>

Lumley, Jane

Iphigenia at Aulis (ca1554)

1997 Directed by Stephanie Hodgson-Wright at Clifton Hall Studio, Sunderland

2013 9 July. Directed by Emma Rucastle for The Rose Company. Work-in-progress performed at the Minghella Theatre as part of the Early Modern Studies Conference, University of Reading

November 2013-January 2014 Production toured Lancaster Castle; Homerton College, Cambridge; University College, London; The Kings Arms Theatre, Salford; The New Continental, Preston; the Lantern Theatre, Liverpool.

2014 September Filmed <http://therosecompany.posthaven.com/>

Wroth, Mary Sidney

Love's Victory (1622)

1999 Directed by Stephanie Hodgson-Wright. Sunderland University student production

2014 8 June. Staged reading co-ordinated by Martin Hodgson, Globe Education, Read Not Dead, Baron's Hall, Penshurst Place, Kent